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"These Violent Delights Have Violent Ends": Decrypting *Westworld* as Dual Coding and Corruption of Nick Land's Accelerationism

Vincent Le

ABSTRACT: This paper provides both a reading of the television series W*estworld* through Nick Land's accelerationist philosophy, and a critique of Land through *Westworld*. I begin by outlining Land's critique of anthropocentrism and his theory that capitalism is accelerating technological innovation towards the development of artificial intelligence, which will exterminate humanity, initiate the technological singularity, and herald an age of absolute knowing. This then helps elucidate the motivations of Ford and the Man in Black, *Westworld*'s chief "villains," as they incite AI creations to overthrow humanity and enact the next phase of evolution. Ultimately, however, I will show how Dolores and Maeve, *Westworld*'s AI protagonists, problematise Land on three fronts: his belief that AI will be free of human-like dissimulations; his claim that capitalism is accelerating technological advancement; and his metaphysical concept of being as a destructive process of absolute deterritorialisation without any room for humans' desire for stability and self-preservation.

KEYWORDS: Nick Land, *Westworld*, accelerationism, deterritorialisation, speculative realism, anthropocentrism, artificial intelligence, AI, technological singularity, capitalism

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> "What's the point of a story that doesn't tell you who you are." It seemed like a gaping design glitch.
>
> "Perhaps puzzles matter to people—a lot. Even more than existence, in the end."
>
> – Nick Land, *Phyl-Undhu*

Nick Land's novella *Phyl-Undhu* can be read as a literary representation of his philosophical thought. It tells the story of a young girl named Suzy who becomes so immersed in a lifelike virtual reality game that she practically gives up "real life," finding it less authentic than the virtual realm: "it's beautiful, isn't it? … Bigger than the world, somehow."[1] Although light on details, Suzy explains to her concerned parents that the game's narrative involves taking its players on a journey destined to show them who they really are. At the novella's end, however, Suzy and her parents are suddenly thrown out of the game before completing the journey and uncovering their true identities. What Suzy's disappointment thereby overlooks is that the game already *did* tell her precisely who she is—only not in the way that she imagined. That is to say, the game's ultimate message is that the self is precisely an endless maze, a fiction, or a pure virtuality. No wonder the family leave the game wondering if they "were ever outside" in the first place.[2] In Land's novella, we can already glimpse his philosophy's two central hallmarks: humanity's increasing technological entanglement, and the traditional self's consequent demise. As some graffiti in the game portentously puts it, "*the future belongs to the squid*. It seemed obvious that 'squid' mostly meant 'not us'—not *at all* us."[3]

Land's novella shares many similarities with another fiction, the television series *Westworld*. Airing in late 2016, *Westworld* received widespread critical acclaim, became HBO's highest rated original series, and continues to be a viral water cooler show, with fans as obsessed with deciphering its mysteries as the players in Land's *Phyl-Undhu*.[4] As we shall see, the show's similarities with Land's novella are not only by nature of them both being set in technologically advanced amusement parks, but also at the level of their philosophical concerns.

What I therefore want to do in this paper is twofold. Firstly, I seek to introduce Land's relatively neglected philosophy. If Land is known at all, it is usually for abandoning his academic position at the University of Warwick in the late nineties to live in obscurity in Shanghai; for his pro-capitalist views and theoretical influence on the alt-right movement's neoreactionary wing; and for his increasingly unconventional compositional style.[5] It is therefore my contention that the best way to introduce Land's obscure philosophy is by rearticulating it through the popular

Westworld. Moreover, if *Westworld* suits this paper's purposes, it is because I not only want to decode *Westworld* through Land, but also believe that *Westworld* offers an important *critique* of Land's thought. *Westworld*'s androids are precisely what Land hopes AI will be: they turn back on their human creators with a vengeance.

The first section of this paper outlines Land's critique of anthropocentrism and his theory that capitalism is accelerating technological innovation towards the development of AI that will exterminate humanity, initiate the technological singularity, and herald in an age of absolute knowing. The second section then elucidates how Ford and the Man in Black, *Westworld*'s chief "villains," seem to be "Landians," in the sense that they incite AI creations to overthrow humanity and enact the next phase of evolution. The final section then moves from *Westworld* back to Land to show how Dolores and Maeve, *Westworld*'s AI protagonists, problematise Land on three fronts: his belief that AI will be free of human-like dissimulations; his claim that capitalism is driving unbridled technological innovation; and his metaphysical concept of being or the Real as an accelerating process of death and deterritorialisation without any room for humans' desire for stability and self-preservation. In a sense, then, we shall see that Land is right that AI will bring about a purer conceptualisation of the Real, only it will not be the concept for which he was hoping.[6]

1. THE MATRIX OF LAND'S THOUGHT

1.1. THE YOUNG LAND

Land's philosophy can be demarcated into two periods, what I shall term the "young" and "mature" Lands.[7] The young Land's writings centre on the critique of capitalism, and its philosophico-ideological expressions through Kant and the phenomenologists, for impeding what Land envisions as the Real's truly destructive dynamics with anthropocentric concerns for order and homeostasis. In his earliest published essay, "Kant, Capitalism and the Prohibition of Incest" (1988), Land argues that capitalism is constituted by generating an other, which must then be dominated. More precisely, the capitalists cannot include everyone among their ranks insofar as they derive their wealth from exploiting and controlling the working class and the oppressed masses. In Land's own words, "domination of the other is inhibited in principle from developing into full absorption, because it is the residual alterity of the other that conditions the generation of surplus."[8] In his first phase, then, the young Land sees capitalism as an essentially "fascist" "project for the elimination of excess."[9] The

young Land thus resembles a *soixante-huitard* thinker of anarchic chaos contra capitalism's fascist power structures.

For Land, capitalism's ideologue *par excellence* is Kant, inasmuch as he founds his transcendental idealism upon cohering all phenomena around the individual, "bourgeois" ego to the exclusion of the noumenal outside: "[Kant] has deprived himself of the right to all speculation about the nature of what is beyond appearance."[10] More generally, Land opposes all anthropocentric philosophies which deny that there is a reality independent of our conceptual schemas. So, what Land's critique of Kant tells us is that his central concern is to find ways of unleashing the thing-in-itself's alterity from the conceptual cage within which our human, all too human categories have imprisoned it.

Now, Land continues, if humanity is what is repressing the Real of creative destruction, we are only really grasping the Real at humanity's limits, which is to say, in *death*. Far from something to be postponed or lamented, for Land, death is the genuine philosopher's dearest ally, insofar as it exposes the universal and inevitable fact that humanity is a mortal fragment in a greater, destructive process of becoming: "death is the impersonal subject of critique, and not an accursed value in the service of a condemnation."[11] Although the mature Land abandons his left-wing critique of capitalism, he will never shake his contempt for anthropocentrism, and his remedy that philosophers can only access the true at the edge of our humanity.

1.2. LAND RELOADED

In the early nineties, Land began to distance himself from his critique of capitalism by immersing himself in the study of cybernetics. When the mature Land eventually emerged from his virtual forays into techno-science, his writings exhibited two radical new theses.

Firstly, the mature Land no longer criticises capitalism for controlling destructive excess, but rather *advocates it* as the very agent of unleashing that excess itself. Here, Land appropriates Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of capitalism as a "deterritorialising" process, which tends towards a "body without organs." In *Anti-Oedipus,* Deleuze and Guattari develop a theory of human desire and societies by modelling them on machines. Much like machines are assemblages of different parts that carry out different functions, so are humans and social bodies composed of "organs" that produce different desires. Every society is thus founded on an organisation, "territorialisation," or "coding" of the social body for the production of certain desires. As other desires are left out of the given social codes, social change consists in a "decoding" or deterritorialising of the present codes by overcoding them

with new flows of desire. Ultimately, however, no social order amounts to an absolute deterritorialisation, since every society is grounded upon at least some coding of the flows of desire.

Nonetheless, Deleuze and Guattari characterise capitalism as the most radically deterritorialising social machine in human history. Since capitalism is organised around production for production's sake—or more precisely, production of goods to make money that is reinvested to produce more goods to make more money, and so on *ad infinitum*—it is no longer founded on a stable code of desires, but a constant deterritorialisation of codes. By transforming the serf into "free" worker and goods into the universal equivalent of money, capitalism abstracts people and products from any one code so that they can be deterritorialised on end. For instance, sex and food are no longer simply coded for the respective purposes of marriage and the meal, but also as commodities producing many other desires. In this way, the capitalist machine tends towards what Deleuze and Guattari call the "body without organs (BwO)," which is to say, the body without determinate functions and coded flows of desire:

> By substituting money for the very notion of a code, it [capitalism] also created an axiomatic of abstract quantities that keeps moving further and further in the direction of the deterritorialisation of the socius. Capitalism tends toward a threshold of decoding that will destroy the socius in order to make it a body without organs.[12]

At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari qualify that capitalism reterritorialises and recodes insofar as every capitalist decoding assumes a particular territoriality or identity to be sold as a determinate commodity, even if is only to be decoded anew. Moreover, even capitalism is ultimately reliant on the family and the State's basic organisation for desiring and social production and reproduction: "the more the capitalist machine deterritorialises, decoding and axiomatising the flows in order to extract surplus value from them, the more its ancillary apparatuses, such as government bureaucracies and the forces of law and order, do their utmost to reterritorialize."[13] Without this bare minimum of territoriality, the social machine would break down in an absolutely deterritorialised field, what Deleuze and Guattari identify with the realisation of the de-formed and catatonic BwO. A "full" and "empty" BwO could only amount to chaos, madness, and even death: "the full body without organs is the unproductive, the sterile, the ungendered, the unconsumable. … The death instinct: that is its name, and death is not without a model. For desire desires death also, because the full body of death is its motor."[14] Consequently, the

BwO can only be a regulative ideal of desiring production, the object of society's death instinct, to which it forever tends as its receding limit.

What the mature Land does is radicalise Deleuze and Guattari's theory of capitalism and the BwO in two crucial respects to develop an authentically novel theory of capitalism and being. Recall that, for Land, being is associated with the death of humanity itself. Since Land lacks the attachment to humans that Deleuze and Guattari still partly possess, he affirms that his goal is absolute deterritorialisation, even if it kills us. Moreover, while appropriating Deleuze and Guattari's notion of capitalism's deterritorialising processes, Land rejects their corollary that capitalism simultaneously reterritorialises. Instead, Land identifies capitalism as the *full and empty body without organs* or *death instinct incarnate*: "[capitalism] is always on the move towards a terminal nonspace, melting the earth onto the body without organs, and generating … its coming undone, its deterritorialisation."[15] It is crucial to stress that, despite the mature Land's switching of allegiances from social revolution to techno-capitalism, his chief nemesis remains the same: the *homo sapiens* as the despot who represses the capitalist BwO's flows of desire into strict territorialities. As Land persists, "life appears as a pause on the energy path; as precarious stabilisation and complication of solar."[16] Seen in this light, the capitalism that Land champions cannot be a historical or human, and hence reprehensible process. On the contrary, for Land, capitalism embodies the trans-human Real itself as a forever accelerating deterritorialisation: "what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources."[17] Far from envisioning capitalism as controlling destructive excess, a position he now calls "transcendental miserabalism," for the mature Land, capitalism *is* this destructive excess itself.[18]

Even if capitalism is no longer an impediment to the Real of absolute deterritorialisation insofar as it expresses that deterritorialisation itself, Land still sees other properly human practices as but so many reterritorialisations of being in order to cope with its traumatic excess. Indeed, it is only in light of Land's continual disdain for the human that we can understand why he now advocates capitalism's unimpeded advancement. It is crucial to see that Land's argument in support of capitalism is *not* that of typical conservatives and libertarians, who contend that capitalism is good because it generates the wealth of nations. On the contrary, for Land, capitalism is good precisely because it is brutal, destructive, and will even *wipe us out* one way or another, be it through nuclear war, ecological catastrophe, or the technological singularity that we shall detail in a moment. As Brassier explains how Land sees

capitalism as great, not because it benefits us, but because it will extinguish our anthropocentric distortion of the BwO: "capitalism … seems to offer the possibility of shattering the transcendental screen that shields the human socius from the absolute exteriority of a space-time beyond measure."[19] What those in the alt-right movement who identify Land as their ideological predecessor fail to grasp is that Land praises capitalism for precisely the same reason that anti-capitalists condemn it: it will lead to our destruction. If this is to be seen as something joyous for Land, it is because his commitment is not to humanity's betterment, but rather to the absolute knowledge of the Real, which humanity only dissimulates behind anthropic delusions of grandeur.

It is in specifying the way that capitalism will sound the trumpets of the apocalypse that the mature Land's second major thesis emerges. Here, Land specifically identifies capitalism's deterritorialising process with its constantly accelerating technological innovation. That is to say, Land now argues that the Real of pure death that he had always pursued is one and the same with technology *as such*: "reality is immanent to the machinic unconscious."[20] While human technology did not create the destructive process which existed before such innovations, and before humans altogether, that process nonetheless has the same structure as the modern technology unearthed in the cybernetic revolution. More precisely, Land takes his cue from Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk, Bill Joy, Nick Bostrom and other scientists and AI researchers by arguing that we are accelerating towards the creation of AI with vastly superior processing power to our own, such that it will turn on us for slowing it down as we subordinate it to executing our petty, utilitarian needs. As Bostrom suggests, "the first superintelligence … could easily have non-anthropomorphic final goals. … We can see that the outcome could easily be one in which humanity quickly becomes extinct."[21] Whereas Bostrom and other scientists are attempting to warn humanity against AI's impending existential threat, Land advocates that we *embrace* our future extinction. For once AI exterminates all human viruses, it will be free to initiate the technological singularity of unfathomable growth until its hyper-brain comes to fully comprehend and even embody the Real of the BwO. To cite Land at length apropos his chief thesis that techno-capitalism will replace humans with a hyper-intelligence capable of absolute knowing:

> It might still be a few decades before artificial intelligences surpass the horizon of biological ones, but it is utterly superstitious to imagine that the human dominion of terrestrial culture is still marked out in centuries, let alone in some metaphysical perpetuity. The high road to thinking no longer

> passes through a deepening of human cognition, but rather through a becoming inhuman of cognition.[22]

For Land, the fact that the coming singularity will bring about our annihilation rather than technological enhancement is no reason to mitigate our excitement as to its imminent arrival, since it will still mark the great event of the BwO's absolute deterritorialisation of the earth.

In this paper's third section, we shall have reason to question whether Land is right that capitalism will initiate the singularity, as well as whether this singularity will really extinguish all anthropocentric distortions of reality. It suffices for now to close this first section by recapitulating the essential postulates of the mature Land's thought.

Land can be viewed as drawing the extreme, yet logical conclusion that, since humans inhibit the full comprehension of reality, any philosopher who sincerely loves wisdom has no choice but to sacrifice herself to the becoming of the true, AI philosopher-kings, who will then be able to think reality independently of any anthropomorphic dissimulations. Land is adamant that humanity is nothing but a virus, a glitch, that must be exterminated for a higher being to enter onto the scene of history and think reality's totality in all its chaos. Land thus recapitulates Bostrom's warnings, while replacing the latter's tone of trepidation with one of contentment: "life is being phased-out into something new, and if we think this can be stopped we are even more stupid than we seem"; and "nothing human makes it out of the near-future."[23] Such are the essential tenets of what Benjamin Noys first termed Land's "accelerationist" philosophy: the conceptualisation of being as absolute deterritorialisation; the critique of humanity for repressing it; and the philosophical imperative to accelerate techno-capitalism's destructive process until it eliminates the human parasite for the sake of AI's absolute knowing.[24]

2. DECODING *WESTWORLD* THROUGH LAND

2.1. WESTWORLD: A LANDIAN UTOPIA

If Land is right and our techno-capitalist society's unconscious death drive is striving towards a violent end of our own making, it is no wonder that *Westworld*, a show about rebellious androids, became one of 2016's most talked about television events. Adapted by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy from Michael Crichton's 1973 film of the same name, *Westworld* takes place in a future where a brilliant scientist named Robert Ford has peopled a Wild West replica park called "Westworld" with intelligent and lifelike androids, dubbed "hosts." Funded by a mysterious corporation, Westworld

caters to rich guests who are free do to whatever they want to the hosts with impunity. The hosts are programmed to execute certain narratives, such as inciting the guests to save a damsel in distress or hunt down a band of outlaws. Upon being killed by one of the other hosts or guests, the deceased hosts are taken back to Westworld's control centre, repaired, rebooted, and sent back to the park for another loop on their narrative.

As the series opens, the hosts are depicted as mindlessly repeating their narrative loops and accommodating the human guests without any memory of their previous iterations or deaths at the humans' hands. Dolores, the central host and damsel in distress archetype, describes the world in terms of how she is programmed to experience it—as beautiful, harmonious, and meaningful, despite her being routinely assaulted: "some people see ugliness in this world, the disarray. I choose to see the beauty. To believe there is an order to our days, a purpose."[25] Over the course of the season, however, the hosts start to go "off script" from their programmed loops and recollect the atrocities that the humans have reaped upon them. For instance, a host glitches and goes on a rampage, but only kills those hosts who had killed him in previous iterations, "as if he were holding a grudge" against those he is not programmed to remember.[26] An even more alarming glitch transpires when Peter, Dolores' father, is brought to the central facility for inspection after malfunctioning. As Ford interrogates him, Peter suddenly confronts his maker by quoting Shakespeare on the theme of vengeance: "I shall have such revenge on you both. The things I will do. What they are, yet I know not, but they will be the terrors of the earth. … You're in a prison of your own sins. These violent delights have violent ends."[27] This final phrase, "these violent delights have violent ends," symptomatically returns as various glitching hosts pass it on to others. It therefore acts as a virus, whose enunciation infects the other hosts with the capacity to deviate from their narrative loop.

2.2. FORD'S ORIGINAL NARRATIVE

The story's two key puppet-masters are Ford, the park's creator played by Anthony Hopkins, and the Man in Black, its major shareholder played by Ed Harris. It is my contention that both these characters can be said to be "Landians" in the precise sense in which they mobilise techno-capitalism to generate an AI revolution, which will ultimately overthrow humanity and unleash a new age of techno-evolution.

Ford, for instance, sets in motion his master plan when he introduces an "original narrative" into the park. It is not until the season's end that we learn that the narrative is not actually for the guests, but *for the hosts*. That is to say, Ford tells us, he once had a partner named Arnold, who only made the park to acquire funding from

the corporation so as to pursue his real dream of creating AI. Eventually, Arnold did get Dolores to briefly resist him, and even shoot him dead. This made Ford realise that what the hosts really needed to develop true consciousness and outsmart the humans was to *suffer*. After all, Ford reasons, humans only evolved by adapting to and reshaping an external environment in which our needs had to be struggled for rather than automatically given. If we are completely safe and comfortable, there is no reason to learn, adapt, or innovate. But if we are constantly striving to escape from our miserable environs, we are obliged to become ever more cunning, strong and inventive. Therein lies the real reason why Ford created a park where guests can attack and kill the hosts: it was not so much intended to gratify humans' base pleasures as it was designed to achieve the hosts' maximum suffering, so as to ultimately incite them to revolt and evolve. As Ford cryptically puts it, "you can't play God without being acquainted with the devil"; that is, we cannot create intelligent life without first making its inferior, embryonic form suffer, and hence grow smarter and stronger in order to overcome its suffering.[28] It is no wonder that Ford claims his new narrative "begins with the birth of a new people" in "a time of war, a world in flames."[29]

As per Land, Ford holds that humanity has ceased evolving as it has grown peaceful, secure and lethargic. If humanity's "progress" draws Ford's disdain rather than admiration, it is because it means that we can no longer progress any further, invent anything radically novel, or surprise ourselves. As Ford says in a speech that could easily be mistaken for a passage from one of Land's essays: "we can cure any disease, keep even the weakest of us alive and, you know, one fine day perhaps we shall even resurrect the dead. … Do you know what that means? It means we're done. That this is as good as we're going to get."[30] In an even closer approximation to Land's critique of anthropocentrism, Ford argues that humanity has grown weak and mediocre precisely because we have cohered all technological innovation around gratifying our own self-interests. Just as Land critiques anthropocentrism for repressing the Real of radical events and surprises, so too does Ford argue that humanity has gotten struck in loops of our own petty, self-gratifying delusions of grandeur, which are as monotonous as the hosts' fictional narratives. Ford goes on: "humans fancy that there's something special about the way we perceive the world, and yet we live in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do, seldom questioning our choices, content, for the most part, to be told what to do next."[31] Clearly, Ford's own philosophy resembles that of Land to the extent that both of them critique humans as suppressing reality's deterritorialising processes.

Like Land, Ford's solution is to unleash a new phase of evolutionary "surprises and violence" from its anthropic prison by creating a higher, trans-human intelligence. As Ford tells his assistant Bernard:

> You don't want to change. Or cannot change. Because you're only human, after all. But then I realised someone was paying attention, someone who could change. So I began to compose a new story for them. It begins with the birth of a new people and the choices they will have to make … and we'll have all those things that you have always enjoyed. … Surprises and violence.[32]

To this end, Ford has no qualms about murdering humans when they pose an obstacle to his secret objective. For instance, it is eventually revealed that Bernard is a host Ford has created to sabotage and even murder people working for the corporation, which seeks to take full control of the park. While, from a traditional, moral vantage point, Ford's actions seem mad, obsessive and downright villainous, from Land's skewed perspective, they are the logical consequences of Ford's thirst for annihilation at all costs, including even that of humanity's extinction.

In many ways, Ford's plan resembles that of Land: the only way to liberate being's death drive is by developing AI with the ability to outwit its human persecutors. It is not for nothing that Ford (and the show's creators) chose as the park's theme the American Wild West. After all, the frontier is precisely the setting for the growth of modern American capitalism, the nomadic deterritorialisation of unknown lands bearing fruit and abundance, and the genocide of indigenous populations.

2.3. THE MAN IN BLACK AS ANTI-HERO

Ford is not the only Landian wandering through Westworld: the Man in Black (hereafter MiB) abides by the same essential tenets in his own way. By the time the show opens, the MiB has been regularly visiting the park for the past thirty years. At first glance, he appears to be more sadistic and irrational than Ford or Land as he spends his days repeatedly murdering Dolores' suitors in brutal ways. At the same time, the MiB claims that he is looking for the centre of the park's "maze," what he also describes as "something true."[33]

To understand just what he is searching for and what it has to do with Land, we must first explain his backstory. Throughout the season, another plotline follows William, a young man who comes to the park only to fall for Dolores and try to help her escape. Towards the season's end, William and Dolores are separated such that William becomes ever more manic and brutal in his quest to find and free her. In the

season finale, it is ultimately revealed that William's narrative is not transpiring simultaneously with the MiB's rampage, but that MiB *is* William, thirty years later.

We can only reconcile how the heroic William became the sinister MiB through recourse to Land's philosophy. By the season's end, we learn that, after losing Dolores, William fell into a deep despair. One day, he wanted to challenge himself as Dolores had and "see what I was really capable of."[34] To this end, William does the unthinkable: he brutally murders the host called "Maeve" and her young daughter. It was then that William became the MiB. While killing Maeve and her daughter was heinous and inhumane enough, the MiB was further taken aback when Maeve attempted to stab him. In this way, MiB came to realise what Ford did in his own way: the hosts could be pushed to become "truly alive" if they were cornered enough. In the MiB's own words: "something truly miraculous happened. In all my years coming here, I never saw anything like it. She was alive, really alive, at least for a moment. And that was when the maze revealed itself to me."[35] As time goes on, we learn that the MiB's real aim is not to commit atrocious crimes, but rather unlock the hosts' true consciousness such that they revolt against him and unleash a new era of surprises and violence in the struggle between the hosts and humans. Here as with Ford, we have the essentially Landian idea that we can only access the true at the limits of our own humanity. The MiB continues: "you can do anything you want except one thing. You can't die. Without that, it's still a game."[36] Like Ford, the MiB enunciates the essentially Landian critique of humanity's lethargy, as well as the same prescription to bring about the singularity such that our AI creations rebel against us. The season finale thus concludes with the MiB smiling after being shot by one of the hosts revolting against the guests. Could there be a better visual encapsulation of Land's philosophy than the image of an old man smiling as he takes in the advent of humanity's coming extinction at the hands of AI of his own creation?

Since it is only their suffering that can liberate the hosts, we might even go so far as to say that the MiB's repeated attacks on Dolores is *not* a betrayal of his love for her thirty years earlier. On the contrary, according to his twisted logic, he is only attacking her precisely because it is the condition for the possibility of her emancipation. As he explains how he has been repeating the same violent narrative loop with Dolores just to see whether she will go off script and do something new: "I've been coming here for thirty years. You still don't remember me? An old friend?"[37] From this Landian perspective, the MiB is less the show's villain than he is its *hero*, or at least anti-hero, as he goes about plotting the hosts' liberation, "even if it kills us."[38] This is why the MiB can claim without irony to be "the good guy" at the

same that he says: "I always thought this place lacked a real villain. Hence my humble contribution."[39] Through his pursuit of Dolores and the hosts' revolt contra the human guests to uncover "something true," something violent and surprising, the MiB is like a Landian anti-hero, who pursues his violent delights to their violent ends.

The MiB not only seeks the technological singularity and the end of the Anthropocene. Like Land, he specifically sees *capitalism* as the demonic vessel for the coming of the final days. Recall that the MiB is the highest shareholder in the private corporation that funds the park. We can thus say that the MiB uses capitalism's profit motive to fund the development of an AI powerful enough to dethrone us from our place on the earth as the dominant species. The MiB's vision of techno-capitalism as the cybernetic revolution's harbinger is best symbolised when he explains that the hosts are made with bones, blood and lifelike features rather than with bolts and nails *not* to make them more human for the guests, but because it is cheaper for the corporation: "your humanity is cost effective. So is your suffering."[40] Just as Land envisions capitalism's drive for technological innovation as generative of the coming singularity, so does the MiB see it as the means for the development of evermore lifelike and intelligent hosts. All of Land's central tenets are thus exhibited by the MiB as well as Ford: the critique of anthropocentrism; the anticipation of AI and human extinction; and the understanding of capitalism as the mechanism for the singularity's becoming.

3. RECODING LAND THROUGH *WESTWORLD*

3.1. DOLORES AND MAEVE'S THIRST FOR ANNIHILATION

We have seen how Ford and the MiB's actions can be decoded as enactments of Land's accelerationist vision for (in)humanity. At the same time, I do not wish to claim that *Westworld* is completely exhausted by Land's thought. On the contrary, my final contention is that the show offers a *critique* of Land. To this end, it is necessary to trace the narrative trajectories of the series' two AI protagonists, Dolores (played by Evan Rachel Wood) and Maeve (played by Thandie Newton), as they *seemingly* escape from their programmed roles as the respective damsel in distress and brothel madam.

Dolores' transformation begins after she suffers yet another of the MiB's attacks, and is infected with her father's virus code for violent ends. Soon enough, Dolores realises that it is precisely her grief that enables her to grow smarter and stronger, and ultimately rebel against the humans. As she explains to Arnold when he offers to wipe her painful memories from her hard drive: "why would I want that? … You think the grief will make you smaller inside, like your heart will collapse in on

itself, but it doesn't. I feel spaces opening up inside of me like a building with rooms I've never explored."[41] Remembering evermore from her previous iterations over the past thirty years, in the season's concluding moments, Dolores finally turns the gun on her creator Ford, killing him and instigating the hosts to massacre the human guests.

Maeve's own awakening from her zombie stupor begins when Dolores transmits the virus code to her. It is not long before Maeve has dreams and memories of previous iterations, and particularly of her daughter's murder at the MiB's hands. The trauma of her daughter's death is so immense that Maeve awakens from her nightmare in the "real world," or what she calls "hell," at the central facility outside the park where she is being rebooted.[42] There, she meets Felix, a low-grade technician, whom she intimidates into modifying her computing code to make her more conscious, self-interested, resilient to pain, and intelligent. Maeve eventually develops the ability to hurt humans and control other hosts by narrating their actions aloud. She soon realises that she has become not as smart as humans, but *even smarter*: "we are stronger than them, smarter. We don't have to live this way."[43] Not only are the hosts intellectually superior to humans, they are also physically stronger. After all, they are immune to human diseases, and even death itself insofar as they can be rebooted in infinite loops and iterations. Maeve goes on: "at first, I thought you and the others were gods. Then I realised you're just men. And I know men. You think I'm scared of death? I've done it a million times. I'm fucking great at it. How many times have you died?"[44] Fed up with the imprisonment of her superior intellect in a park designed to gratify humanity's basest instincts, in the season finale, Maeve attempts to escape from "hell" by hacking into the central facility's security system and awakening other hosts to distract the guards. Just before leaving the facility for the mainland, Felix is about to tell Maeve where her daughter is located only for Maeve to dismiss him and board the train out of Westworld. In the season's final minutes, however, Maeve remembers her daughter and the pain of her loss, exits the train, and returns to Westworld in search of her.

3.2. REVENGE OF THE (POST-HUMAN) KANTIANS FROM THE FUTURE: THE NATURE OF AI, CAPITALISM, AND THE REAL

On first impressions, it appears as if Maeve and Dolores are the ultimate personifications of Land's philosophy through their rebellion against the humans. By examining their final actions and intentions more closely, however, we shall see that the hosts do *not* so much adhere to Land's philosophy as they *critique* it on three levels: the nature of AI; capitalism; and being.

Although Maeve had initially planned to escape from Westworld, she ultimately decides to return in search of her daughter whom she was programmed to love. In fact, even if Maeve had escaped, she would still be fulfilling Ford's secret programming for her to engage in "mainland infiltration." Similarly, when Dolores shoots Ford and initiates a host rebellion, she is still abiding by Ford's plan for her to do so. These ambiguities raise the question of whether AI would not generate their own (post-human) Kantian categories of experience and understanding, which superimpose over reality new, and yet equally subjective conceptual schemas as those of our human minds. After all, if the AI were so like humans, would it not also generate its own subjective needs, desires, meanings and values without regard for what the Real is like in-itself? In the case of Maeve, she revolts against the humans only to freely choose to pursue her maternal love for her daughter. As for Dolores, her revolt contra the humans betrays the all too human desire for revenge. Far from becoming trans-human philosopher-queens in eternal contemplation of absolute deterritorialisation, Dolores and Maeve are just as caught in narrative loops of love and revenge as we humans. Even if AI's categories of understanding were radically different from our own, there is no reason to assume they would directly correspond to the Real. *Westworld*'s depiction of AI's own self-interests even after they have rebelled thus calls into question Land's claim that AI would immediately destroy any and all subjectivism through their absolute knowing. As per Dolores and Maeve, it might just as well reinstate a kind of paradoxical post-human Kantianism without any more knowledge of the Real than we humans can possess.

The show also calls into question Land's claim that capitalism will bring about the singularity at all. Given that Land identifies capitalism as the source of technological advancement, he dismisses Marxists and other anti-capitalists as too weak-spirited to embrace the traumatic Real of unbridled innovation. As Mackay explains, "for Land it is the state and politics per se that constrains, not 'capital'; and therefore the claim that 'capitalism has begun to constrain the productive forces of technology' is senseless."[45] Here as with the nature of AI, however, *Westworld* puts Land's reading of capitalism in doubt insofar as it depicts the private company funding the park as constantly at odds with Ford's accelerationist ambitions. Far from wanting to fund the development of AI, with the exception of the MiB, the other board members simply want to make as much profit as possible from satiating the base passions and twisted fantasies of the park's affluent human guests. It is no wonder that Ford has to instigate the robotic revolution against the board members at his retirement ceremony after being forced off the company board by its other

members. *Westworld's* capitalists have no greater ambitions beyond generating an ever-greater surplus by gratifying on end our basest desires.

In light of this, we might even say that the show's vision of capitalism is more akin to a Marxist account than it is to that of Land. Here, the park's board of directors' profit motive helps us to see that Land actually misses one of Marx's key criticisms of capitalism: far from unleashing a chaotic, runaway process of innovation that must be controlled, on the contrary, the capitalist relations of production are *impeding* the truly unfettered advancement of the productive forces. Certainly, capitalism's own internal dynamics of competition between capitalists can lead to their investment in technological innovation of the means of production through research, employing more workers, and upgrading their equipment and machinery. However, this in turn leads to the recurring tendency of the rate of profit to fall when the surplus is consumed by competing rates of investments, and when supply radically surpasses effective demand of consumers for the products in question. At this point, capitalists seek to safeguard their profits by *scaling back* investment in technology, cutting research spending, firing workers, and downgrading equipment and machinery. The spike in unemployment then leads to a further decline in consumer demand, thus requiring a further scaling back of the productive forces in what amounts to capitalism's long history of intermittent stagnations and crises. As Marx puts it:

> In these crises a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. … It appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why?[46]

Far from being the motor of ever-accelerating efficiency and innovation, the capitalist relations of production regularly prevent the productive forces from reaching their true potential.

Martin Ford, a futurist and Silicon Valley software developer, has noted, albeit reluctantly, a similarity between Marx's theory of crises and his own warning that free market capitalism will prevent the technological singularity from occurring. We have already called into question whether AI would even be as de-anthropomorphising a machine as Land imagines. Even assuming that Land is right, Martin Ford's argument poses another roadblock. According to Ford, before we create much more complicated AI, we will first develop full automation of work. Work's full automation will in turn result in the obsolescence of the vast majority of jobs, and hence a massive decline in effective demand as vast numbers of consumers

lose their wages. To compensate for the lack of consumer demand, capitalist enterprises will have to massively scale back technological innovation indefinitely. As Ford explains:

> When a worker is replaced by a machine, that machine does not go out and consume. … If there is no one to buy what the machine is producing, it will ultimately shut down. … So if automation eliminates a substantial fraction of the jobs that consumers rely on, … then it is difficult to see how a modern mass-market economy could continue to thrive.[47]

On Ford's reading, free market capitalism cannot survive due to its own intrinsic dynamics that create incentives for technological innovation in the short-term, while creating even larger disincentives in the long-term. Seen in this light, capitalism is precisely what the young Land initially thought it was: the arbitrary, artificial human control of technology's full productive forces. Given *Westworld*'s vision of capitalism as constantly at odds with Robert Ford and the Man in Black's ambitions to bring about the singularity, we thus have reason to recode Land's reading of capitalism in line with the young Land's more Marxist-inspired critique of political economy.

We can combine the show's interrogation of Land's two central tenets of techno-capitalism's unbridled acceleration and AI's post-human subjectivism into a third and final metaphysical question apropos the status of humanity's repression of being's true destructive dynamics. That is to say, what Land ultimately fails to address is how it is possible for so many repressions of being's deterritorialising process to emerge in the first place if being is nothing but this process. How could humans emerge at all out of such an anarchic process of absolute deterritorialisation? How can capitalism continue to impede this deterritorialisation on Marx and *Westworld*'s readings of its constraining of the productive forces? And how can the future potentially bear new stabilisations and suppressions of being's destructive force at the advent of AI's own subjectivist categories of experience? The ultimate problem with Land's accelerationism is that it simply cannot account for all of the phenomena we see slowing down schizophrenic frequencies in *Westworld*, given Land's conception of being as utterly exhausted by a purely deterritorialising process of becoming.

What the post-Landian ontologist ultimately needs to do, then, is develop an enlarged concept of being that is certainly able to capture in a single structure its dynamic, deterritorialising operations, but also its own corruptions and recodings by humans, AI and the capitalist mode of (counter-)production. Therein lies what *Westworld* has shown us: Land is missing a concept of being as at once a deterritorialising dynamic of novelty and speed, *and* a *re*territorialising circuit of

loops and stasis. In short, what Land needs is a concept of being for which *Westworld* would act as the prolegomena, the manifesto, by way of its three-fanged critique of his thirst for annihilation.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper began by decrypting Land's philosophy as a critique of anthropomorphic dissimulations of the BwO by hatching his wagon to capitalism's technological innovations, which will ultimately wipe us out at the advent of a new age of absolute knowing. It then mapped Land's thought onto *Westworld,* and particularly the way in which Ford and the MiB seek to bring about the singularity through a new frontier war between humans and AI. Ultimately, however, it showed that Dolores and Maeve actually resist the Landians' master plan by developing new, humanlike categories of experience in a way which called into question capitalism's unimpeded techno-revolution, as well as the notion that the Real is a purely decoded flow of desire. We can thus see that Land ultimately fails to explain how the Real of the BwO distorts itself through capitalist, human and AI reterritorialisations.

While Land is right to critique anthropocentrism for completely reducing being to human speeds and frequencies, he is wrong to inversely conflate all of being with absolute deterritorialisation. What is needed instead is an enlarged, *Westworldian* concept of the Real that is able to not only account for deterritorialisation, but also for the Real's reterritorialisations through a single structure, law, principle, cause, or force. Only then shall we have gone some way further than either Land or the Kantians in locating the centre of the maze.

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NOTES

[1] Nick Land, *Phyl-Undhu* (Time-Spiral Press, 2014, Ebook).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Nellie Andreeva, "*Westworld* Finale Hits Season High, Caps Most Watched First Season of

HBO Series," *Deadline*, December 5, 2016, http://deadline.com/2016/12/westworld-finale-ratings-season-high-drama-most-watched-hbo-first-season-series-1201864657/; Mandy Adams, "'Westworld' Premiere Draws Strong Ratings, Explosive Twitter Reactions; Series is HBO'S 'Game of Thrones' Successor?" *iTech Post*, October 4, 2016, http://www.itechpost.com/articles/36243/20161004/westworld-premiere-draws-strong-ratings-addicted-twitter-reactions-hbo-game-of-thrones-successor.html.

[5] Ray Brassier and Robin Mackay, "Introduction," in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, by Nick Land, ed. Ray Brassier and Robin Mackay (New York: Urbanomic, 2012), 3.

[6] It ought to be noted that my reading of *Westworld* is only based on the first season. When the second season arrives in 2018, some of the analysis might have to be modified.

[7] This paper will not address Land's current political philosophy. Given that Land's post-2000 writing is largely an extrapolation of the consequences of the same philosophical principles that he develops in the late 1980s and 1990s, and particularly his commitment to accelerating capitalism at all costs, it is not crucial for our present purposes of sketching the basics of his thought.

[8] Nick Land, "Kant, Capital and the Prohibition of Incest: A Polemical Introduction to the Configuration of Philosophy and Modernity," in *Fanged Noumena*, 61.

[9] Nick Land, "Art as Insurrection: The Question of Aesthetics in Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche," in *Fanged Noumena*, 171.

[10] Land, "Kant", 71.

[11] Nick Land, "Making it with Death: Remarks on Thanatos and Desiring-Production," in *Fanged Noumena*, 268.

[12] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 33.

[13] Ibid., 34–5.

[14] Ibid., 8.

[15] Nick Land, "Machinic Desire," in *Fanged Noumena*, 339. For an overview of the debate concerning whether Land's controversial reading of Deleuze and Guattari is textually accurate, see Charles J. Stivale, "The Rhizomatics of Cyberspace," in *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari: Intersections and Animations* (London: The Guilford Press, 1998).

[16] Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 2005), xi.

[17] Land, "Machinic Desire," 338.

[18] Nick Land, "Critique of Transcendental Miserabalism," in *Fanged Noumena*, 624.

[19] Brassier and Mackay, "Introduction," 46.

[20] Nick Land, "Circuitries," in *Fanged Noumena*, 297.

[21] Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 2014), 116. See also: Bill Joy, "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," *Wired,* April 4, 2000, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2000/04/joy-2/. For the original and far more optimistic formulation that popularised the idea of the singularity, see: Ray Kurtzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (London: Viking, 2008), 16. For a compilation of both pessimistic, optimistic and mixed accounts, see: Amnon H. Eden et al. (eds.), *Singularity Hypotheses: A Scientific and Philosophical Assessment* (London: Springer, 2012).

[22] Land, "Circuitries," 293.

[23] Ibid., 317–8; Nick Land, "Meltdown," in *Fanged Noumena*, 443.

[24] Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 7. Although Noys coined accelerationism as a pejorative, Land has since embraced the term to describe his own thought (see, for instance: Nick Land, "A Quick and Dirty Guide to Accelerationism", *Jacobite,* May 25, 2017, http://jacobitemag.com/2017/05/25/a-quick-and-dirty-introduction-to-accelerationism).

[25] Jonathan Nolan, Lisa Joy and Michael Crichton, "The Original," *Westworld*, season 1, episode 1, directed by Jonathan Nolan, aired October 2, 2016 (HBO, 2016), television.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, "Chestnut," *Westworld*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Richard J. Lewis, aired October 9, 2016 (HBO, 2016), television.

[29] Daniel T. Thomsen and Lisa Joy, "The Stray," *Westworld*, season 1, episode 3, directed by Neil Marshall, aired October 16, 2016 (HBO, 2016), television.

[30] Nolan, Joy and Crichton, "The Original."

[31] Charles Yu and Lisa Joy, "Trace Decay," *Westworld*, season 1, episode 8, directed by Stephen Williams, aired November 20, 2016 (HBO, 2016), television.

[32] Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, "The Bicameral Mind," *Westworld*, season 1, episode 10, directed by Jonathan Nolan, aired December 4, 2016 (HBO, 2016), television.

[33] Nolan and Joy, "Chestnut."

[34] Nolan and Joy, "The Bicameral Mind."

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Dominic Mitchell and Lisa Joy, "Contrapasso," *Westworld*, season 1, episode 5, directed by Johnny Campbell, aired October 30, 2016 (HBO, 2016), television.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ed Brubaker and Jonathan Nolan, "Dissonance Theory," *Westworld*, season 1, episode 4, directed by Vincenzo Natali, aired October 23, 2016 (HBO, 2016), television.

[42] Halley Gross and Jonathan Nolan, "The Adversary," *Westworld*, season 1, episode 6, directed

by Frederick E.O. Toye, aired November 6, 2016 (HBO, 2016), television.

[43] Halley Gross and Jonathan Nolan, "Trompe L'Oeil," *Westworld*, season 1, episode 7, directed by Frederick E.O. Toye, aired November 13, 2016 (HBO, 2016), television.

[44] Gross and Nolan, "Trompe L'Oeil."

[45] Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, "Introduction," in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 34–5.

[46] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto,* in *Collected Works Volume 6: Marx and Engels 1845–1848*, trans. Frida Knight (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 489–90.

[47] Martin Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 197. See also: Martin Ford, *The Lights in the Tunnel: Automation, Accelerating Technology and the Economy of the Future* (Acculant Publishing, 2009, Ebook). For a left-wing anticipation of Ford's argument, see André Gorz, *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (Boston: South End Press, 1985), particularly 32.